

Four Stone Beads

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Category: Hercules: The Legendary Journeys

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-12-03 09:00:00

Updated: 1999-12-03 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 10:28:45

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,999

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A mysterious traveler tells a tale of heroism.

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This General Fiction (no sub-text) story is rated PG.

The spelling of Deianira conforms to the spelling in Edith Hamilton's Mythology.

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Is there more to destiny than simply what happens? -Anonymous

By the time the fire had become nothing more than glowing embers, only two of the men lodging at the inn that evening were sitting before the hearth. Balik the bounty hunter was finishing his fifth ale and basking in the glow of fire from within and without, while the young man seated next to him continued to stare at the embers as if they spoke a language only he could understand. The young man had said very little since he'd sat down hours before. Of the nine men who had sat before the hearth earlier, the young man was the only one who hadn't told a story of his time on the road. When asked to, he'd always declined respectfully in favor of another. Now that only the two of them remained, however, the bounty hunter wanted a story from this quiet young man.

"Tell me something of your time on the road," Balik said. "No one stays at this inn without traveling some distance. What is it that brought you here?"

The young man continued to stare at the embers until Balik was sure he wouldn't reply, then he turned to the bounty hunter and watched him silently.

"Bounty hunter," he said at last, "there's little I can say about what brought me here that you probably haven't heard already many times over if you've spent any time in inns like this where people share their stories, be they real or imagined."

The young man's sly smile had Balik smiling as well. During the earlier story-telling, Balik had wondered if the young man was perhaps a little slow and didn't realize that some of what he was hearing from the others was hope beyond hope itself. Balik now realized, however, that this young man was much more perceptive than he at first appeared to be.

He has some stories to tell, Balik thought, and no doubt many good ones at that.

"But if you must hear a story from me," the young man continued, "I can tell you the one that was told to me by someone who once shared a fire with me as I am with you now. A man who was once a partner to Hercules."

Balik shook his head and sighed. "Young man, if you'd rather not tell me a story just say so. You don't have to offer me some unlikely second-hand account about a partner to Hercules. I want a story of adventure from someone who's actually lived it."

The young man waited until Balik looked at him, then he held the bounty hunter's gaze long enough for Balik to grow uncomfortable. "I assure you, bounty hunter, that the story I was told is true. But if a man in your line of work isn't interested in hearing about Melasius, then I will leave you to your thoughts and your ale."

"Melasius?" Balik said, grabbing the arm of the young man as he stood up to leave. "The man with whom you spoke and shared a fire was Melasius? The Melasius who traveled with Hercules to the Elysian Fields with the permission of Hades himself?"

The young man stared at Balik until the bounty hunter let go of his arm. "Yes. The Melasius whose head will bring at least one thousand dinars from the hands of every active warlord who's ever been defeated in the past through the young hero's efforts."

Balik thought about what he could do with one thousand dinars, then motioned for the young man to sit down. "We are talking about the Melasius who fought with the son of Zeus by the side of Xena and Gabrielle in the city of Ire, and there received the praise of Zeus himself?"

The young man nodded as he sat down. "The same."

Balik considered this revelation while the young man settled himself. Any information he can give me about Melasius that might lead to

Melasius' capture will be of great value. But if he does know Melasius and considers him a friend, why is he so quick to speak of him to a bounty hunter who'd obviously be interested in the many rewards being offered? Does he think me so unskilled that whatever he tells me will do me no good? He hasn't touched an ale all night so his tongue hasn't been loosened by drink. Maybe for some reason he wants to see Melasius dragged in to one of the warlords. Or maybe this story of his is nothing more than the stuff shoveled from the floor of a stall.

"How did you meet him?" Balik asked, ready to weigh each detail.

The young man's eyes took on a faraway look as he watched the glowing embers. "I met him on the road one morning when he saved me from two thieves who thought to rob me and leave me as carrion for the birds. He stepped in at once and drove the thieves away despite an injured leg which he did nothing to help heal from the encounter. To thank him, I offered him a place to rest at a camp I had set up nearby. At first, I didn't know it was him, but then I noticed the leather cord with the four stone beads around his neck. I knew then it couldn't be anyone else. And when I asked him if he was Melasius, he not only didn't deny it, he told me the story of his time with Hercules, and that of a later time with Xena and Gabrielle."

Balik nodded. "The leather cord with the four stone beads was given to Melasius in the city of Ire after he'd fought to save the city with Hercules, Xena, and Gabrielle."

"Yes. It was given to him by a young woman named Letria who is well known for her skill with such things. She made it to thank him for the success the four of them had in defeating the Diphan army, which at the time was under the direction of Eelos, a warlord who'd become a pawn of Ares. Each of the four is represented by a stone bead, all of which are bound together as a unit by the leather cord. Melasius promised Letria he would always wear it after she fastened it around his neck."

Balik was suddenly more convinced that this young man was telling the truth. He was either very quick at the art of deception, or he really had met Melasius. Few could come up with such detail so quickly. Balik knew of the infamous leather cord with the four stone beads because the descriptions he'd been given of Melasius were consistent in mentioning it. In fact, it was one of the only details about his appearance that those who'd spoken of him to Balik had agreed upon. But Balik had never been told anything about the item's origin or meaning. He wanted to hear more.

"Tell me the story that he told you, young traveler. But before you do, tell me your name and your age."

The young man settled further back in his chair and stared more deeply into the embers. "My name is Esalis, I've seen twenty-four winter solstices, and the story of Hercules and Melasius began while Hercules was traveling alone in search of a friend.

"Hercules and Iolaus had parted company temporarily after Iolaus received word that a village where he had friends was recovering from a lengthy illness. Though the village was well on its way to recovery, Iolaus still wanted to make the long journey so that he

could help his friends in whatever way was most needed. Hercules offered to go with him, but Iolaus told Hercules that he'd be all right to travel on his own. He said there was no point in Hercules leaving the area when he could be needed at any moment, especially since Iolaus didn't know if he himself could do anything other than offer his help once he arrived at the village. He thought Hercules should stay where he was most likely to be needed. They would meet up once Iolaus returned.

"So Hercules decided that since Iolaus was off to see old friends, he would do the same by traveling to the village of Tyra where he'd once met a man named Phictus, a map-maker and historian who'd decided to raise his family on Tyra's beautiful countryside. But as soon as he arrived in Tyra, Hercules was told that Phictus had taken his family to another village where they were living with people who'd left the city of Athens to found their own community. These Athenians had stopped at each village they'd passed en route to their new location to see if any villagers wished to join them, provided that their departure didn't affect their villages adversely."

Balik scowled as Esalis paused. "Were they religious zealots?"

Esalis smiled and shook his head. "No. They weren't anything like that. They were just a group of people who wanted to live a peaceful life in the country. Crime being what it is in the city of Athens, they wanted to raise their children in a safer area. Phictus not only liked the idea, he also saw a chance to become the lone historian and map-maker for the new community."

Balik nodded. "Makes sense. Did Hercules travel to this new village when he found out that Phictus wasn't in Tyra? And what did you say the name of that new village is?"

"To answer your second question first, I didn't say what the name of the new village is, but it's Amocia. And if you're wondering what the name of the village Iolaus traveled to is, it's Aetria."

This kid's sharp, Balik thought.

"And no, Hercules didn't travel to Amocia when he found out that Phictus had left. He stayed for many days to help the village defend itself against a group of marauders that had already attacked the village twice. You probably know that the Tyrans are rural people who spend most of their time at crafts. As a result, they know next to nothing about effective military action and defense. What few weapons they do make are for perfecting their skill at crafts, not fighting. But Hercules was not only able to direct the defeat of the marauders when they attacked the third time, he was also able to find out what was behind the attacks."

At this point Esalis paused again. He wanted to see if Balik was actually following the story or just humoring him. It took only a moment for Esalis to find out which.

"So what happened?" Balik asked. "What was behind the attacks?"

Satisfied that Balik was following, Esalis continued. "Hercules captured one of the marauders just before the last attack and made

him talk, which he did at length, and in doing so revealed the hand of a Tyran named Malix who had hired the marauders to commit all three attacks."

Balik waved for the innkeeper to bring him another ale. "A Tyran hired marauders to attack his own village?"

"Yes," Esalis nodded. "Long before the attacks on Tyra, Malix had been trying to convince the other villagers of the benefits of moving into the Athens commercial market to sell their goods alongside the finest in all of Greece. Malix didn't say so at the time, but he knew that Tyran goods could compete with all others in Athens because he had taken some and sold them in the marketplace. The Tyrans didn't want any part of it, though. They were content to make what they needed and offer what surplus they had to neighboring villages. They didn't care about commerce or the finery that could come with it. The goods they made were about craftsmanship and necessity, not dinars."

Balik seemed uncomfortable with such a thought, but before he could say anything, the innkeeper brought his ale, and Esalis continued.

"So Malix never brought it up again. Then, after his efforts had long since been forgotten by the other villagers, he hired the marauders to loot the village and steal some of the goods. But he warned the marauders not to damage the tools and materials used to make the goods, or to make it look like the sole purpose of the attack was robbery. The thefts were part of the plan Malix had come up with to guarantee that regardless of what the villagers wanted, he'd still make money from the sale of their goods.

"He thought the attacks might convince the villagers to arm themselves for defense. And to do that, they'd have to increase their weapons production. The commercial center he wanted could then easily follow once the restructuring of the village began. If they made adjustments for defense, he'd argue, why not make other adjustments to build commerce, especially since more money would be needed to continue the build-up for defense. But if they still refused to fortify the village for defense, and ultimately prevent commercial development, the village would remain an easy target for the marauders, which it had been until Hercules arrived. Malix had taken the stolen goods to Athens, sold them, paid off the marauders, kept a hefty sum for himself, and planned to continue the thefts until he either slowly bled the village dry or brought about the build-up for defense.

"But Hercules shut him down. And after he banished Malix and his marauders from Tyra forever, promising that the village would be protected from that point forward by himself and any other god who would join him, he sent word to the marketplace in Athens that no one was to allow Malix or any of his people to be part of the commercial activity. He didn't have them jailed because he wanted them to live with tarnished reputations and to pass the word that the village of Tyra was protected by him. And I think he may have hoped that at some point the marauders would redeem themselves."

Balik scowled again. "You really think so? Did Melasius tell you that?"

Esalis shook his head. "Not in so many words. But Hercules does at times have that effect on people. Look what he did for Xena."

"True enough," Balik said before he took a long swallow of his ale. His eyes were shining with the warmth of the amber liquid, and Esalis could see his head moving ever so slightly as if he was having trouble focusing on the hearth before him. Both were silent until the bounty hunter broke from his thoughts. "So it was during that time that Hercules met Melasius?"

Esalis smiled. "Yes. And Melasius proved to be a very effective hand in the fight against the marauders. Because of his circumstances at that time, he was able to help Hercules in ways that Hercules himself said were vital. He drew up lists of weapons, village materials, villagers' skills, even a geographical map of the area. He was a jack-of-all-trades when one was most needed."

"You said 'his circumstances at that time'? What about them?"

"Melasius had been preparing for many years to take an exam for a teaching post at the village school. But because he needed work in the village if he didn't acquire the teaching post, he was also prepared to become a scroll merchant. In fact, before the first attack on the village, he was so well prepared for both that he'd been planning to leave Tyra temporarily to see some of the countryside and have some adventures before he returned to take the exam and pursue whatever life he'd have. Once the attacks occurred, though, he stayed to help."

"So Melasius is a scholar?"

"He was then. And a fine one at that."

"What happened?"

"Well, once the marauders had been defeated and Hercules was ready to travel to Amocia to see Phictus, he saw that Melasius was ready to leave as well. So he asked Melasius where he was planning to go, and when Melasius said wherever the road took him, Hercules suggested that they travel together to see Phictus since Melasius knew Phictus as a fellow Tyran.

"But they never made it to Amocia. What followed after they left Tyra was a series of adventures that lasted about eighteen sunsets. During that time, Hercules helped a great many people, while Melasius proved to be just as effective a partner as he had been in Tyra. Together they protected people on the road, saw people safely from one place to another, broke up fights, and sometimes even started fights when they thought certain low-lives needed to be taught some manners. And despite the fact that they had only known one another a short time, they became an incredible team. Not a team like Hercules and Iolaus, but an incredible team nonetheless."

Esalis paused and continued to stare at the fire. Balik looked at the young man. A thought crossed his mind as he sat there watching him, but the pleasant sensation he had from the ale told him that his mind would naturally jump to such a conclusion about the young man's true identity. He thought briefly about drawing the knife at his belt to see how quickly the young man reacted to the threat, but he reminded

himself through the fog in his mind that just about anybody less drunk than he was could easily defend against him.

"So what happened then?" he asked, then offered an unmerciful belch that he didn't excuse. "Was it after these adventures that they went to the Elysian Fields?"

"Yes. At dawn on their nineteenth day together, a messenger from the underworld who introduced himself as Grache appeared before them on the road and told them that Hades needed to see Hercules on a matter of great importance. The god of the underworld knew that Melasius was traveling with Hercules, so he agreed to let Melasius appear at the gate to the Elysian Fields where Hades was waiting. When they arrived, they were told by Hades that Deianira needed to see Hercules about something that only she could tell him. She wanted him to hear whatever it was from her before he heard of it from someone else, or arrived one day and found out for himself with no advanced warning. It seems that she had been spending time with a man named Eronis who had become an important part of her life and the lives of Hercules' children."

Balik brightened slightly at the mention of the children. "What are the children's names?"

Esalis didn't hesitate. "Klonus, Aeson, and Ilea. By all accounts, they're beautiful children. But as I was saying, Hades told Hercules that Melasius couldn't travel to the Elysian Fields with him and return since Melasius is a mortal. But when Melasius heard this he said that he would wait for Hercules wherever Hercules wanted him to wait. Hercules told Melasius that he'd already been more than a great help to him, and that he couldn't ask Melasius to wait indefinitely for him to return. But Melasius told him that he'd wait as long as he had to because he knew that if the circumstances were reversed and he needed Hercules to wait for him, Hercules would wait as long as necessary. Melasius even told Hades that he would travel to the Elysian Fields with Hercules just to be there for him even if it meant that he couldn't return.

"When Hades heard this he was moved in a way he'd rarely been before. He knew that Hercules was admired by mortals in part because he never demanded that anyone worship him in fear of punishment as so many of the gods and demigods did. But when he saw that Melasius was actually willing to give up his life here for Hercules out of genuine respect, he nodded at the gate to the Elysian Fields and told them both to go. He would allow Melasius to return with Hercules. So the heroes went through together, and Melasius waited alone until Hercules had spoken with Deianira and the children. Hercules met Eronis and was pleased to see that Eronis was good to his family. But seeing Eronis also reminded Hercules of the life he can no longer have with his family here thanks to ox-eyed Hera, may she be strangled by Zeus."

Balik turned to Esalis. That last comment sounded a little too personal. "I take it you've been injured by Hera."

Esalis looked at him. "Hera doesn't bother with the likes of us unless she sees fit to destroy us for her own amusement. Just knowing that, aside from what she did to Hercules' wife and children, is enough."

The bounty hunter nodded, his eyes reflecting the embers before him

as if they betrayed his own private rage at the thought.

Esalis continued. "Melasius waited the entire time that Hercules was with his family. Never once did he stray from the area where Hercules knew to find him. Some of the spirits he saw brought him food and spoke with him. A female spirit named Trelope played the lyre for him while he ate. But he never walked away from his self-defined responsibility to his partner, for that is how he now thought of Hercules. He knew about Iolaus, and would never consider replacing him, but he would always think of himself and Hercules as partners. And when Hercules returned, the two of them left the Elysian Fields together in silence, never saying a word until hours after they had returned to the road. Once Hercules spoke again, they talked at length, and though Melasius knew that Hercules would carry the weight of living without his family for the rest of his life, he also knew that Hercules would honor Deianira's wish that it not hinder him in his work."

Esalis paused to reflect on the weight of such a burden, but when he noticed that Balik was too drunk to care about reflecting on anything, he continued. "Some time later that day Hercules and Melasius were approached by a soldier on horseback who was leading two saddled horses. The soldier had been sent by Xena to bring Hercules and Melasius to the city of Ire, which was about to be attacked by the neighboring city of Dipha. Dipha had come under the control of the warlord Eelos who was threatening the Irians with enslavement if they didn't submit to his rule. Xena knew Eelos from her darker days and knew that any negotiation would fail. They'd have to fight and they needed help. So when she heard that Hercules and Melasius were in the area, she sent the soldier to find them."

"How did she know they were in the area?" Balik slurred.

"Some of the people that Hercules and Melasius had helped on the road had since traveled to the city and spread word of their deeds. Once they arrived in Ire, they prepared for war, then four days of bitter fighting followed. Both sides seemed evenly matched for the first three days, but by the fourth day, Hercules and Xena had taken their side to the brink of victory. That's when Ares revealed himself and let it be known that he was the one directing Eelos. He and Hercules fought despite Hercules' fatigue, and Hercules defeated him.

"But the moment the god of war hit the earth for the last time that day, Zeus arrived to punish Ares for his interference in the lives of so many people, and to say that from that point forward the city of Ire would be protected by Zeus himself. Any mortal, demigod, or god who crossed the Irians in any unjust way would be punished swiftly and severely. Knowing that his father doesn't deal in hollow threats, Ares fled, as did Eelos and the defeated Diphan army, then Zeus praised the efforts of Hercules' comrades by recognizing Xena, Gabrielle, and Melasius by name.

"Cresius, the eldest statesman of the city, then declared a four day festival to celebrate not only the victory over the Diphans, but also the protection they would always have from Zeus and their four new allies. And these four new allies were part of the festival for the first three days, but on the morning of the fourth day, Iolaus finally caught up with Hercules, and Melasius left the city. What most people don't realize, though, is that Melasius didn't leave just because of Iolaus."

Balik blinked. "I've heard that he left because he didn't want to travel with the two of them."

Esalis smiled and shook his head. "That wasn't it. He regretted not being able to travel as a team of two with Hercules once Iolaus returned, but he left because of what was happening between himself and Gabrielle. And she knew that was his reason. But she didn't say anything about it to anyone, not even to Xena until they both found Melasius some time later in the village of Priasis."

"I've never heard anything about Melasius and Gabrielle. If Gabrielle knew why he left, why did she keep it from Xena?"

Esalis was silent as he began poking at the glowing embers with a walking stick left behind by one of the men who'd shared the fire with them earlier. Balik's weary mind was heavy with sleep and drink, but his curiosity remained. "By the gods, man, what was his reason for leaving and why did Gabrielle keep it from Xena?"

Esalis continued to poke at the embers. "You'll have your answer to those questions when I finish my story. But first I must tell you how Gabrielle found out what his reason was. Melasius told me himself that during the nights that followed the first three days of the festival in Ire, he sat and prepared one scroll each for Cresius, Xena, Gabrielle, and Hercules. To each of them he spoke of the time they had shared and what it meant to him. He intended to give all but Hercules their scrolls before he left with Hercules after the last banquet on the fourth day. Hercules would receive his whenever they finally parted company.

"Then on the last morning in Ire, Melasius went out early to see some of the countryside before the final banquet at midday. But he returned much earlier than he'd anticipated and found that Iolaus had finally caught up with Hercules. And when he saw the two of them together alongside Xena and Gabrielle, he knew that there before him were heroes whose individual destinies would be linked forever in a way that he could never be a part of, at least not as much a part as he'd come to hope he could be. There before him, despite the four stone beads bound together at his neck, were what he called the unweavable threads of heroism.

"So he sat down, added to the scrolls for Cresius, Xena, and Gabrielle, then completed the one for Hercules. He said in each that it was time for him to continue on alone and do the work they had all inspired him to do. He also explained that he was going to send word to his home village of Tyra that he wouldn't be returning to take the exam for the teaching post, or to set himself up as a scroll merchant. He closed all but the one for Gabrielle by saying that if any of them, Iolaus included, ever needed him for any reason, all they had to do was put out the word. The same was true for Gabrielle, of course, and she knew that, but he had other things to say to her about the future, and the primary reason for his departure. He left the scrolls where he knew they'd be found, then he left the city before anyone knew he'd returned from his outing.

"They were all disappointed that he didn't stay, but he spoke so sincerely to them in the scrolls that he didn't anger them as much as you might think. Xena was the least charitable of them all, but only because she thought it was so unfair of him to leave when he was

growing close to Gabrielle. But as I've said, he explained to Gabrielle the primary reason why he left, though she didn't want to say anything about it until she could talk with Xena privately and at length. Later that day, Hercules and Iolaus left Ire, as did Xena and Gabrielle, Ire began its reconstruction, and none of them heard anything about Melasius until Xena and Gabrielle discovered the village of Priasis on their way to the village of Nere.

"Xena and Gabrielle were on their way to Nere to find lodging for the night when they found Priasis. Until then, not even Xena knew it existed. When they arrived, they found the villagers in the midst of a flurry of activity. They were rebuilding sections of the village and preparing as best they could for a military defense. Their attempts at both showed that they really didn't know much about either, the military defense especially, but they were intent on both. Xena asked one of the villagers what was happening and he explained that several days before the village had been attacked and robbed by a band of marauders who had threatened to return. Scouts had since seen them camped nearby, so the village had begun preparing for the next attack. Someone new to Priasis was directing their preparation.

"Xena introduced herself and was taken immediately to this director, while Gabrielle went off to help with the wounded. Xena then came face-to-face with Melasius since he was the one who was directing the military effort in the village. They spoke privately, and though she was ready to demand an explanation for his departure from Ire, he told her before she could that he would talk to her about why he'd left as he did, but first he had to meet his responsibility of protecting the village. He said she and Gabrielle could either help him, or they could leave him alone until he was done. Either way, he would ensure the safety of the villagers before he did anything else.

"Naturally Xena agreed to help, so he told her how he'd ended up in Priasis and who the village was up against. It seems he'd been walking through those same woods on his way to Nere when he'd come upon the village just after the attack. He stopped to help and discovered that the same gang of marauders led by Malix that Hercules had banished from the village of Tyra had taken to the roads and were surviving by stealing from small, defenseless villages like Priasis. Melasius then found out through a source in Athens that Malix had set up a frontman in the city who was selling the goods the marauders continued to steal.

"Any thoughts Hercules may have had about the marauders having a change of heart had been in vain. And since Priasis was such an easy target, they were coming back once the village began to get back on its feet. There was even talk about it being one of a circuit of villages they would rob in sequence to allow each village time for rebuilding. Each of their targets would be villages that all but the most noble of kings could care less about defending. Melasius was hoping to keep them away long enough so that he could reveal himself as the leader of an effective defense, then invoke the name of Hercules as the village's protector. That might be just enough to scare them off. He wanted to shut them down for good so they wouldn't hurt anyone ever again, but he knew that the most he could hope for was just to save the village. The arrival of Xena and Gabrielle changed everything, however.

"With Xena and Gabrielle there, Melasius had the two people he needed to shut Malix and his marauders down once and for all, which is exactly what happened. Their combined efforts saw the marauders led away in chains to an Athens prison, their frontman for sales in the marketplace dragged in with them, and the village given back the hope it needed to rebuild and go on. Then once it came time for Melasius and Xena to discuss Melasius' departure from Ire, Gabrielle told Melasius that she would talk to Xena because she hadn't as yet told Xena everything that he had written in her scroll. And here is where I will answer your question about why Melasius left the city of Ire as he did, and why Gabrielle didn't tell Xena about it.

"Xena was curious to say the least about why Melasius and Gabrielle seemed to be getting along so well despite how it had all ended back in Ire. She knew she was far more angry with Melasius than Gabrielle was. But Gabrielle told Xena that the reason why Melasius left when he did had to do with her place as Xena's heroic partner, and what that place meant to their future as a team. Melasius saw the destinies of Gabrielle and Xena as woven together in a way similar to those of Hercules and Iolaus. The bond that makes each team what it is, he said, makes heroic partners irreplaceable. So he'd asked Gabrielle in the scroll if she and Xena had ever thought about whether their selfless dedication to helping others allowed room for either of them to have a relationship.

"And because Gabrielle had told Melasius about her brief marriage, Melasius also asked her in the scroll if she felt she could ever leave Xena again to marry someone as she had when she'd married Perdicus. He wasn't proposing to her, but he was serious enough to wonder. And if she couldn't leave Xena as she had before, would it be possible for her, or even for Xena, to bring someone along on the road, perhaps permanently? Or would that somehow disrupt their teamwork to the point where the good they could still do would somehow be less in the long run? Melasius knew that it was easy enough to say that another effective hand could only help, but he also knew that many things about his possible relationship with Gabrielle could be distractions to the help she gave Xena.

"So the primary reason why Melasius left Ire when he did is because he knew these questions were ones that Gabrielle needed to answer on her own without him there, questions that she could answer only after she'd had as much time as she needed to discuss them with Xena. So his leaving when he did had to do with Iolaus only because he saw in Iolaus the male counterpart to Gabrielle, and ultimately understood just how strong the bond between Xena and Gabrielle is because he knew from traveling with Hercules, and finally seeing them together, just how strong the bond between Hercules and Iolaus really is. He said that when he saw Iolaus that day in Ire, the picture of the four he had in his mind was finally complete.

"And the reason why Gabrielle didn't tell Xena all of this at the time is because she knew that such things could take far longer to discuss than one afternoon. Melasius was questioning the very nature of what it meant to be a heroic team. Gabrielle knew that she and Xena would talk about it all, but not until there was enough time to say all that needed to be said, and to reflect on what it all meant. Plus she knew that once she brought it all up, Xena would ask her what she thought, so Gabrielle wanted to have an answer that was as well thought out as it could be.

"Melasius had closed her scroll by saying that she should take as much time as she needed, then once she knew where she wanted him to be in her life, she should send a messenger to find him so they could talk. He even provided her with the name and location of someone who would find him for her. But before she talked to Xena, they found him in Priasis."

Esalis stopped at that point and looked at Balik. He'd become so caught up in telling the story that he'd briefly forgotten that someone was listening to him. But Balik had since fallen asleep and was snoring softly. Esalis didn't know at what point Balik had finally nodded off, but it seemed as if the bounty hunter had been asleep for some time.

Esalis stared at the last of the embers for a while before he stood up and walked over to the bar to pay the innkeeper for the room he'd never used. When the innkeeper turned to put away the money, Esalis left him a sizeable tip and walked out into the chill of the early morning.

The moment he closed the door behind him, Esalis removed the light scarf he'd kept around his neck during the night. The early morning breeze opened the collar of his shirt to reveal four stone beads bound by a leather cord. The necklace he wore, however, was not the original that he'd just spoken of as he'd told his story. He wasn't Melasius, but he'd dreamed of what it would be like to be him.

As he walked to the road that led out of the village, Esalis thought of the scroll he'd once read that chronicled the events he'd just spoken of. He'd never shared a campfire with Melasius. In fact, he'd only seen Melasius once near the village of Priasis. But the man whose life he knew almost as well as his own had still rescued him.

Esalis had come upon Melasius one day while the young hero was sitting near the woods writing on a scroll. Esalis hid in the woods and watched him until Melasius was suddenly distracted by commotion on the road. After quickly replacing the scroll in his pack, Melasius fought valiantly to defend a mother and her children from four attackers. At one point during the fight, the scroll fell from Melasius' pack, though no one saw it happen except Esalis, who didn't move from the woods until long after Melasius had escorted the family away, and the thieves had recovered enough to stumble off. Esalis then went for the scroll and read Melasius' personal account of his adventures. But nothing followed Melasius' mention of the fact that he was in the woods at that time to give Xena and Gabrielle the time they needed to talk about all that he'd asked Gabrielle to consider. Esalis then took the scroll to the edge of Priasis and left it where he knew someone would find it and return it to Melasius.

It had been over forty sunsets since Esalis had read the scroll, but he'd heard nothing about where any of them had ended up, or what decisions they had made. He knew he'd hear about them at some point, however, so he didn't investigate further. He just continued to travel, having made a decision of his own, and continued to do the work that the heroes he'd read about did so well for so many. And for Esalis, this was a major change in philosophy.

When he'd seen Melasius outside of Priasis, Esalis was trying to find Malix so that he could join up with him. At the time, he saw nowhere

else for a petty criminal like himself to go. But he'd been so inspired by what he'd read in the scroll that he'd become a hero instead. And because it was Melasius who had helped him make that decision, Esalis had created his own leather cord with four stone beads in honor of the man who wore the original, the man whom he knew could never be caught by an ale-swilling bounty hunter. And though he did at times wonder what Gabrielle had decided, Esalis knew that regardless of what decision she'd made, the four heroes represented by the stone beads would all continue to be through their words and deeds what he himself called them: the unweavable threads of heroism.

The End

End
file.